

## *Wrestling with Spirit*

David R. Hudson, Feb. 25, 2018

Twelve years ago, when our son Will was in his first year of graduate school at the University of California, Kate and I rented a backyard artist's studio in Berkeley for the holidays. It was tiny, but sufficient—a bathroom, a simple kitchenette, a sleeping loft for Kate and me, couches and the floor for the boys.

The day before Christmas was warm, clear, and bright—perfect weather for an excursion. We drove the 101—the Redwood Highway—several hours north to the quaint village of Mendocino, where we walked the trails in the seaside park and ate lunch on the rocks at the water's edge.

Returning, we took the coast road—the Pacific Coast Highway—a highway in name only—the slower scenic route. It follows a narrow coastal plain crowning the bluffs that rise hundreds of feet above the turquoise water below. Where creeks and rivers empty into the sea it drops down into ravines forested with redwood and Douglas fir and then winds back up out of them again to the plain. Cattle graze on the grassy plain, oblivious to its beauty. Where steep ridges intrude on the plain, shrinking it to nothing, the road hugs the edge of the cliff, and passengers on the ocean side lean away instinctively.

All along the coast giant pillars of hard stone stand in the sea, just yards from the shore—sea stacks, they're called—buffeted by wind and waves, stubbornly resisting their eventual demise. By late afternoon the sea breeze that has been blowing all day has kicked up waves that crash against the stacks, sending spray skyward. Falling, it washes in a froth of white around their feet.

We passed through tiny seaside villages that date to the lumber boom of the late nineteenth century—Elk, Manchester, and Fish Creek. We passed the lighthouse at Point Arena, drove through the horsey community of Sea Ranch—and, sixty miles and two hours later, just north of Jenner, where the Russian River empties into the Pacific, we pulled over on the side of the road, got out the car, and looked back at the coastline that swept in a long arc to the north of us—in the foreground, a barbed wire fence—beyond it, pasture, its grass, now green in the rainy season, bending in the moist salt-filled sea breeze. Beyond the pasture, the sharp edge of the cliffs and a shoreline rimmed with white as far as we could see—thirty miles to Point Arena—further to the King Ridge Mountains of the Lost Coast, north of Mendocino—seventy miles—eighty perhaps. A pair of ravens soared on the updraft above the cliff face, croaking with contentment. And on the water waves rolled from the west, one after another, huge curling giants rising from an unimaginable distance. And all this in the warm light of late afternoon that paints the world with vibrancy.

I stood transfixed, in awe of the scene. I was sure I had never seen anything so beautiful.

You have felt that. What is it—at the core of the awe and wonder you feel at the depth of a canyon, the vastness of a sea, the height of a mountain, the color of sky, late afternoon light, a sunset?

In his 1836 essay *Nature* Ralph Waldo Emerson, the nineteenth century Transcendentalist Unitarian, says, "In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds something as beautiful as his own nature." Do we share something fundamental with the rest of Creation?

Why are we moved at a birth? Why are we moved by tragedy? Where does empathy come from? What spirit moves us?

Spirit; what is this? We invoke it. We sing, "Spirit of life come unto me....Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion."

It's a word that's been used for thousands of years, with innumerable shades of meaning—derived from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning breath—and also soul. Like breath, this *spirit* is ephemeral, invisible, without body, immeasurable. We can't put our hands on it, weigh it, count it. We know it only by the way it feels in our hearts, by the way it moves us.

To the Hebrews the Holy Spirit was a kind of wind—the breath of God—bringing life to a lifeless universe—carrying the Word of God. To early Christians it became the third person of the Trinity—fully God, but not the same as Father and Son. For Christians the Holy Spirit is also a kind of messenger, instilling believers with faith, enabling them to live righteous lives, showering them with the blessings of love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness.

For some spirit is a living entity—formless—a ghost, in effect—the surviving essence of someone or something whose body has died. When my friend converses with the spirit of her dead father, she converses with an entity that exists without form, but with on-going energy and life. Not for me; when I engage with the spirit of *my* father—which I admit to doing a lot these past twenty years—I engage with what I consider to be his essence, his legacy, his memory. It engages me; it moves me; but it is more idea than physical reality.

Granted, the line is fuzzy. Is not an idea a real thing? Does it not have energy? I am not a physicist. Who am I to say?

Regardless of how we conceive it, at some point in our lives we are all moved by spirit. It fulfills us in some way. And we seek it again. We invoke it.

The anthem says it well. "Come, Spirit, come, our hearts control. Our Spirits long to be made whole." Yes, we long to be made whole.

The American Buddhist nun Pema Chodron says that all human beings are predisposed to waking up—awakening. It seems to me that the sensing of spirit is an invitation to waking up, for in those moments we recognize that we do share something fundamental with the rest of Creation—its essence. And in that recognition we are returned to Wholeness.

We sense *intuitively* that wholeness is in connection with the rest of creation. Awareness of that connection manifests as love for it—and for ourselves—as we recognize our participation in it. We are

overcome by its vastness and complexity. We experience awe and wonder. Are we surprised that Albert Einstein, the archetypal physicist, shared that awe and wonder?

The spirit works in mysterious ways.

It surprises us—as it surprised Emerson, walking alone across the village green. In the essay *Nature* he says, “Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear....Standing on the bare ground, my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God.” He doesn’t use the word *spirit*, but I would.

Touched by it—spirit—we long for it—and we seek it. We seek it in solitude. We seek it in the company of others. We seek it in nature, like Emerson and Thoreau. We seek it in houses of worship. We seek it in silence. We seek it in a grand symphony hall.

And we try to name it—put it in a bottle. But, as Yahweh told the Israelites, “I am he who cannot be named.”

But we struggle to name it—define it—describe it. It varies for all of us. For me, it takes the shape of dawning awareness of one’s participation in the wondrous whole of Creation. It is like my relationship to this community—UUMAN. I am woven into *it*, and *it* is woven into me. I am in the Whole of Creation. The Whole of Creation resides in me.

How can it be otherwise? We are stardust, remnants of the mass and energy of the Big Bang. We share our essence with all other forms in the Universe—all other elements of the Creation. *I* am a particular manifestation of that matter and energy—in a specific time and place.

The genius Einstein puts it this way. He says, in the male-centric idiom of his day, “A human being is a part of the whole called by us “the universe”, a part *limited* in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something *separate* from the rest—a kind of optical *delusion* of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening the circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.” For those of you who know her work, doesn’t Einstein sound like the Buddhist Pema Chodron there?

We *feel* separate, but, as the song goes, “We long to be made whole.”

And so we, as adults, explore what it means to be a part of the Whole. We become intentional. As Pat Shea tells us, “we wake up.” We attend. We appreciate. We are grateful. We are thankful. Something tugs us toward wholeness. I call that something *spirit*.

For Unitarians, with our belief in the inherent goodness of humankind, and Universalists, with our belief that no one is damned to hell, such a life-giving Spirit—a Spirit of Life— infuses everyone—not just the

elect or the believers. This spirit may not be obvious to us. We may not hear it speak often. Its message might be muffled, indistinct at times. It *requires* us to be intentional, to pay attention, to listen, to be mindful. But it is accessible to all. In fact, it dwells within us all—the essence of what it means to participate in Creation.

Again, Emerson doesn't call it *spirit*. He calls it soul—for him an eternal, invisible part of us we share with all others, our connection to the Divine.

In his 1841 essay by the same name Emerson describes what he calls the Oversoul—a Unity in which everyone is contained, a Universal Soul indistinguishable from our own individual Soul—*spirit*, for me. He says this soul we share is our True Nature—our True Self—something we cannot disguise, however we try. He says, “It speaks from our character, passing into our thought and hand, and becomes wisdom and virtue, power and beauty.” We are contained within this Soul of the Whole—and at the same time it is contained within us, he says—this Universal Soul—this spirit—that UU singer/songwriter Jim Scott calls The Oneness of Everything.

How can this be—this paradox? I suggest in the same way that you and I are woven together in the fabric of this religious community. We are woven into it—contained by it—and it is woven into us.

This perfect Whole—this Soul—shines through us like a light—Emerson says. At some point in our lives each of us senses it, each of us becomes aware of a spirit moving in us.

What *we* might call *awakening* Emerson calls *Revelation*. He says the experience agitates us with awe and delight. I won't dispute that. Isn't that what I experienced on the Sonoma coast that Christmas Eve? Here is how Emerson describes this mingling of the universal soul with the individual soul. He says, “A thrill passes through us at the reception of new truth.....It comes to all of us, the lowly and the simple—whomever will put off what is foreign and proud. It comes as insight, serenity, and grandeur.” *It comes as insight, serenity, and grandeur*. Can you feel that?

How does this happen? Let me—the non-physicist—speculate.

Nothing is at rest. The sun bombards the earth with light. The earth, spinning on its axis, warms. Winds blow. Ocean currents flow. Rain falls. Growth and decay, life and death, erosion and eruption happen.

As with us. Even as we rest our billions of cells grow and divide, decay and die. Every moment we are something new.

But these cells of ours hold ancient memories of our evolutionary development. How else is it that we dream of falling from the limb of a giant tree, as Paul Simon recalls in his song Graceland? How does the newborn human know to dogpaddle and hold its breath underwater?

Everything is in motion. Electrons whirl around nuclei like the earth orbiting the sun. Through his elegantly simple formula— $E=MC^2$ —Einstein tells us of the unfathomable quantities of energy bound up in the matter of our world. This matter vibrates. Everything vibrates—to one degree or

another. Nothing is as solid as we think—even the granite monoliths of Yosemite—the sea stacks of the Mendocino coast.

We move through the world in a particular time and space—eating, working, resting, procreating—focused on a task or a mission—often absentminded, unaware. But sometimes when we are still—quiet—calm—we are open enough—aware enough—to feel the vibrations of the universe—to be connected to its energy—that invisible, untouchable force of Life—force of Being—for rocks exude it, too—that force of life Emerson calls Soul—that I call Spirit—as Emerson felt it on that village green at twilight nearly two centuries ago.

In a moment like that I am connected to all the forms around me—animate, inanimate, human, other. I am connected to the stars and to the first single-celled organisms that emerged in the primordial soup of the early seas. I know that the dust of which I am made has existed in countless forms through the epochs of time. I experience awe and delight.

Everything moves toward fulfilment in one way or another. We call it Wholeness. In those rare moments when we are touched by Spirit, we sense what it means to be Whole—not to be separated in the way Einstein describes, but rather to be connected. We have experienced it as infants or toddlers, exploring the world—like kittens—expanding our sense of the world with every new discovery—unafraid—in love and joy. We become fearful with time—put up defenses to protect ourselves.

But in those rare moments when we are touched by Spirit we are *restored*—in that moment—to Wholeness. We glimpse it. It fades, but having seen it, we see it easier the next time.

For me—let me emphasize that—for me that is the spiritual path—awakening enough to sense—in whatever ways we can—our interconnectedness with everything else. And in that periodic, unpredictable discovery and growing awareness are the roots of love and compassion.

And so we sing, “Spirit of Life, come unto me....sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.” Awaken me to my place in the indivisible web of all existence, of which I am an inherently worthy part, we ask. Fill me with the four limitless qualities of Tibetan Buddhism—love and compassion, joy and equanimity. Bring me to Wholeness.

May it be so.

David R. Hudson

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